

**September 2-3, 2018**

**"Converting Our Careers"**

**Holmeswood Baptist Church, KCMO**

**Rev. Keith D. Herron, Senior Pastor**

**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

**James 1:17-27**

**Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

This is the weekend that's the product of the influence of the American Labor Movement. It's the weekend we tip our hat to the impact the common laborer has had on our American way of life. It's just a symbol, you realize, of the way life is shaped and held together by the work we do. We spend the first quarter of our lives trying to figure out what to do when we grow up and then we spend the middle two quarters trying to be happy doing whatever it is we discover to be our life's work.

Labor Day is a holiday where we take a stand for working people. It's a day "*to hear what the Bible says about work, greed and money, rich and poor, brave discipleship, oppression and violence and sharing the earth's bounty.*"<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we begin today a series of sermons from James, the New Testament book that most of the early church questioned and belittled before accepting as Scripture. The book of James bounced around on the fringes of acceptability for several centuries before it was finally admitted into the canon of Scripture.

The problem with James is its simplicity. We want words that ring with the holy sound of someone adept at writing Scripture. We want flowery pronouncements and long discourses on sacred issues. James is blunt and doesn't mince words. The words of James are simple and challenging and leave little room for confusion. Put simply, James is a Bible for bottom-line believers. It's a hard-hitting word about practical Christian living. So how does James have anything to do with Labor Day?

The message of James is written for those who live and work in the workplace. James is a streamlined, pocket-version of the Christian life meant to be carried with you outside the walls of this church to a world that needs to feel the heartbeat of God through the lived experience of a committed believer in Jesus.

When we read these words and seek to incorporate them into our daily experience, we realize we are hearing from someone who was pragmatic to the core and understood that the challenge of living the Christian faith was what Søren

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, Chris, "Good News for American Workers," from The Baptist Center for Ethics website, [www.ethicsdaily.com](http://www.ethicsdaily.com), 8/28/03

Kierkegaard called "a long obedience in the same direction."<sup>2</sup> This is Kierkegaard's notion of simplicity so the believer can will one thing over and over again as an act of spiritual direction.

In our reading today, James warns us to be prepared for the coming of temptations. He warns it's not unusual for us to get confused about what to do or where to go. Temptations cause us to lose our way and get confused about how to live. Under the pressure of trials and temptations we become disoriented and unsure of what to do. James tells us to remember God never changes. To remind us of the unchanging presence of God, he uses the language and imagery of the poet: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows* (James 1:17, NIV).

In order to live with confidence, we need to recognize God never changes and whose light we can trust to lead us. It's an old wisdom lost to us urban dwellers that in earlier times one looked to the stars for orientation in the darkness. God has flung markers in the heavens as the lights that help us know where we are and which direction to travel.

But there's more. In order to live the Christian life in the world where we live and work, we are given practical advice: *You must understand this, my beloved: Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness* (James 1:19-21, NRSV).

There's a certain character that can be traced to the presence of God in you. It's a certain something that comes from God being a part of the core of your life. One's life given to God can be a powerful witness because of the holy qualities that come from being submitted to the Lordship of Christ over the small and insignificant details of your life.

Many call the work we do our vocation, an idea that comes from the Latin word, *vocare*, meaning "to call." Frederick Buechner claims we know our calling in the world to the work we do as (a.) the work we need most to do and (b.) the work the world needs us to do. To put it in other words, he says, "*The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*"<sup>3</sup> The reality is we must find ways to merge our faith-world with our work-world. James makes much of the ultimate sense in which we have no faith unless it's incorporated into our inner, spiritual world. Are you willing to let your core identity as a Christian soak into every pore of your being? Is it possible to become so Christian that you can no longer distinguish between your inner and outer worlds?

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<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren, from *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. "A long obedience in the same direction" is Kierkegaard's notion of simplicity so the believer can will one thing over and over again as an act of spiritual direction.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Vocation," *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, 95

James paints a strong picture for us to consider: *What do you see when you look in the mirror?*

One whose life is not committed to Christ looks in the mirror, and after just a few brief moments, cannot remember what his or her image was. It's a haunting thing to consider. Wisdom literature always connects possession of wisdom with its practice as specified in the law. In this passage, wisdom is described as a spotless mirror that reflects God. Thus, by looking into the mirror of God, one can determine whether their life is being lived according to the practice of the wisdom of God. James involves all the parts of the body in the schema of Christian perfection:

- The tongue speaks rarely and never in anger.
- The ears hear the word and obey.
- The eyes see and remember the images reflected in the law of wisdom.
- The hands and other parts of the body carry out the deeds that are practical evidence a person knows the law of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

So how is it you can convert your career? Most of us need to find creative ways by which to let the gospel infiltrate our lives for the rest of the week. For you see, what you are out in the world is what you are really made of.

All of us realize if we are honest, we put on our best selves when we come here much like the Sunday clothes we wear and hang up until the next time we get ready to go to church. It's who you are out in the world that needs converting. James would say, "Amen!" to that kind of wisdom. He would want us to know that until we experience conversion in the whole of our lives, we still have work to do in making our conversion real.

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, 1988, 54-55